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CHARLES MEDD

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ELECTION '76: THE FIRST DEBATE AND THE ECONOMIC ISSUES

ANNCR:

ECONOMIC ISSUES WILL BE THE FOCAL POINT OF THIS WEEK'S OPENING DEBATE BETWEEN PRESIDENT FORD AND HIS DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGER, JIMMY CARTER. AS THE CANDIDATES PREPARED FOR THURSDAY NIGHT'S TELEVISED ENCOUNTER, CHARLES MEDD HAS A PREVIEW OF WHAT TO EXPECT.

VOICE:

THE CONVENTIONAL VIEW OF AMERICAN POLITICS IS THAT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS REVOLVE AROUND ECONOMIC ISSUES, THAT GOOD TIMES FAVOR THE INCUMBENT, BAD TIMES THE CHALLENGER. ACCORDING TO THIS LINE OF THINKING, JIMMY CARTER SHOULD WIN IN NOVEMBER BECAUSE PUBLIC OPINION POLLS SHOW MOST VOTERS ARE UNHAPPY WITH THE ECONOMY AND PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE. BUT WHAT THE POLLS DON'T SHOW IS WHETHER THE VOTERS FEEL THEIR ECONOMIC INTERESTS WILL BE BETTER SERVED BY PRESIDENT FORD OR THE MAN FROM GEORGIA WHO SEEKS HIS JOB.

IN THEIR INITIAL DEBATE MISTER CARTER CAN BE COUNTED ON TO EXPLOIT WHAT HE SEES ARE THE PRESIDENT'S CHIEF VULNERABILITIES -- REPUBLICAN POLICIES THAT BROUGHT ON UNEMPLOYMENT, INFLATION, FEDERAL BUDGET DEFICITS AND THE WORST RECESSION IN FORTY YEARS. AND HE WILL POINT TO THE USUAL LIST OF DEMOCRATIC CAMPAIGN PROMISES -- FROM PROVIDING JOBS FOR ALL AMERICANS TO A COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE PLAN.

PRESIDENT FORD'S ARGUMENTS ARE EQUALLY PREDICTABLE. HE WILL ASSERT THAT UNDER HIS MANAGEMENT THE ECONOMY IS RECOVERING, THAT MORE AMERICANS ARE WORKING THAN EVER BEFORE, THAT PRODUCTION

IS UP AND INFLATION DOWN. MISTER FORD WILL ALSO ARGUE THAT NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE HAD HE NOT VETOED EXPENSIVE LEGISLATION PASSED BY THE DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS AND THAT A CARTER ELECTION MEANS MORE SPENDING AND MORE INFLATION.

IN GENERAL, THE ECONOMIC DEBATE IS EXPECTED TO FOLLOW PARTY-LINE POSITIONS, WITH THE DEMOCRATS DESCRIBED AS BIG SPENDERS, THE REPUBLICANS AS LACKING IN COMPASSION AND INITIATIVE. WHAT MAY BE THE MOST TELLING PART OF THE DEBATE IS THE DISCUSSION OF TAXES. IN AN ELECTION YEAR, THE SUREST WAY OF OBTAINING VOTES IS TO PROMISE LOWER TAXES, BUT MISTER CARTER RECENTLY BROKE THAT RULE BY RECOMMENDING A SHIFT IN THE TAX BURDEN FROM THOSE WHO EARN LESS TO THOSE WHO EARN MORE. ASKED TO DEFINE THE DIVIDING LINE, THE DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE SUGGESTED THE MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME LEVEL WHICH IN THIS COUNTRY IS ABOUT FOURTEEN THOUSAND DOLLARS A YEAR.

THE REMARK BROUGHT IMMEDIATE JOY TO THE REPUBLICANS WHO POINTED OUT THAT THE CARTER PROPOSAL WOULD MEAN MORE TAXES FOR HALF THE POPULATION AT THE VERY TIME THAT PRESIDENT FORD IS CALLING FOR AN OVERALL REDUCTION. MISTER CARTER SAYS HE WAS MISUNDERSTOOD, THAT HE IS ONLY SEEKING THE KIND OF TAX JUSTICE THAT REPUBLICANS, INCLUDING THE PRESIDENT, HAVE ALWAYS OPPOSED. MOST OBSERVERS, HOWEVER, BELIEVE THE CARTER TAX PROPOSAL ALREADY AMOUNTS TO A MAJOR POLITICAL BLUNDER, BUT JUST HOW SERIOUS IT IS WILL NOT BE DECIDED UNTIL THE VOTERS HEAR BOTH SIDES OF THE ARGUMENT IN THE OPENING DEBATE.

GH/RCS